

Executive Summary

Many efforts are underway to find a better means of applying Federal dollars to ecosystem restoration projects. From comparable metrics to monetization, ideas cross the spectrum on a method to compare ecosystem restoration projects on a national scale. A different approach is needed to develop a clear, rational process for establishing the Corps budget submitted to the Office of Management and Budget that takes into consideration the variability of habitats across the country. This will have the benefit of moving the Corps into a more systems-oriented and collaborative process when budgeting for the Ecosystem Restoration Business Line.

Currently the Corps budgeting process for projects in the Ecosystem Restoration Business Line directly ranks/compares ecosystems that are dissimilar. For example, a freshwater wetland may be compared to a saltwater marsh. These two could be of different ecological importance to the Nation but, in the Corps budgetary ranking, they could have equal importance through the existing scoring system.

One possible framework to avoid this conflict would be a National Ecosystem Restoration policy focused on Ecological Divisions. Ecological Divisions represent a more regional size and distribution of habitats that include many different types of comparable or similar habitats. Ecological Divisions are defined by many physical and biological features which may include biodiversity, ecosystem functions, and physical structures, such as landforms, landscape juxtaposition, and vegetation structure. This approach intrinsically views habitat from a systems perspective.

The Corps of Engineers should take the lead on developing an Inter-Agency Prioritization Committee (IPC) which would be a multi-agency, national-level committee tasked with the responsibility of assembling all available data and establishing funding goals for individual Ecological Divisions. The IPC would be represented by Federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, and academia having specific technical expertise in ecosystems.

Once the IPC has established funding priorities and levels-of-effort for individual Ecological Divisions, the budget process for ecosystem restoration projects would change significantly. Instead of a ranking process by District, then Major Subordinate Command, then Headquarters, funding would be allocated to each of the Ecological Divisions based on the prioritization established by the IPC. Projects within the same Ecological Division would then compete internally for the funding allocated through metrics consistent with that Ecological Division. For example, the existing budget metrics used for the fiscal year 2009 budget would be appropriate for comparing projects in the same Ecological Division.

A properly planned, collaborative effort to prioritize habitat restoration strategies from a national level through Ecological Divisions will help move the Corps of Engineers to a more efficient, holistic planning and implementation process for ecosystem restoration. The Ecological Division concept will provide a more unified Federal approach for focusing ecosystem restoration funding across organizations, and allow for better acceptance of selection metrics used between similar projects in a common Ecological Division.